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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [UG](#) [SU](#)
SUBJECT: NORTHERN UGANDA: LOCAL VIEWS ON PEACE,
RECONCILIATION, AND JUSTICE

REF: KAMPALA 1475

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Government officials, international organizations, human rights groups, and local residents in Gulu expressed cautious optimism about the prospects for resolution to the war in Northern Uganda. Most reservations are associated with the mental stability of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony. Despite these misgivings, the improved security situation is enabling internally-displaced persons to work their farms by day and discussions about reconciliation are beginning. Most Gulu interlocutors argue that peace and reconciliation must come before dealing with justice issues for LRA criminals and want Acholi customs to be respected when determining Kony's fate. Other challenges that lie ahead are the management of potential conflict over land as people return to their farms, compensation for all war-affected northern Ugandans for their losses, coordination of donor activity, and issues of maintenance of security as the Uganda military is spread thin and incoming police forces are ill-equipped. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Poloffs traveled with a USAID delegation to Gulu, capital of one of three Acholi districts in northern Uganda from July 31 to August 3 to meet with local officials, international organizations, military officers, and local residents. Gulu officials and religious and traditional leaders are fully engaged in the negotiations with the LRA.

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GUARDED OPTIMISM
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¶3. (SBU) Gulu local government's vice-chairman Kitara McMot said that he, like most area residents, is hopeful that a peace deal will come out of current discussions with LRA leader Joseph Kony. McMot noted that much of the local optimism is based on the relatively calm security situation over the past few months and Kony's retreat to DROC. McMot confirmed that the numbers of internally-displaced persons returning to farm their land by day in increasing as outlined in reftel. However, he described a clear division of opinion on the peace process between those Acholi who had been abducted (less optimistic) and those who had not (more optimistic). Ex-LRA combatants, who live and move around freely in Gulu, told McMot that Kony will be hard to pin down. They say that Kony uses unclear language when giving orders so he can deny that he directed atrocities and he will likely do the same with various envoys. There also is the fear among them that Kony might be persuaded to come back to Uganda only to be killed at a later date to prevent him from falling into the hands of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and testifying against the Government of Uganda.

14. (SBU) Echoing McMot, James Oyem, Gulu's Deputy RDC responsible for security, expressed hope that peace may be near, but said his expectations are tempered by Kony's personal instability. Oyem described Kony "as very tricky" and as a person who will "cry when being squeezed and then regroup when the pressure is lifted". Oyem's boss Walter Ochara is part of the delegation of traditional and local leaders that have met with Kony in Garamba. Kony reportedly has doubts about whether or not he will be sent to the ICC and questions the capacity of area residents to truly forgive him. Oyem also stated that the LRA negotiators at Juba are not talking in Kony's interest and are using terms that Kony does not understand, which could become problematic in finalizing a possible deal. For its part, Oyem said that the Ugandan Government is trying to dispel Kony's doubts through the visits of local, traditional, and religious leaders to Kony at Garamba National Park.

15. (SBU) UNHCR and WFP officials confirmed to poloffs that the improving security situation is also encouraging IDPs and others to begin returning to their land. Over the past few months, there have been no major security incidents. UNHCR estimates a 50 percent reduction in hostilities during this period. The small groups of LRA that are operating mainly raid fields at night for food. These groups at times have abducted some locals to carry the food back to their hiding places, but immediately release them. Overall abductions, however, are down substantially. WFP and local officials say that voluntary movement of IDPs to "land access camps" or "decongestion sites" is growing. There are 18 camps which host between 800 and 4,000 people. Residents are confident enough to return to their land by day to areas where there is a UPDF presence, but sleep in the intermediary camps at night for protection.

16. (SBU) WFP Gulu Director Pedro Amolat explained that local residents are still mistrustful of LRA's future plans, having lived through periods of relative calm before a resurgence in LRA attacks. UNHCR and WFP say that the LRA also may be leaving small units behind in case the talks fail. The local residents may also sense this and prefer taking advantage of the land access camps and UPDF protection while they assess the prospects for a lasting solution. Poloffs visited a night commuter shelter in Gulu where only 300 children--down from 3,000--are currently using the facility. Catholic Relief Services, UNICEF, and Save the Children report that the numbers of night commuters in Kitgum is also decreasing and that closure and consolidation of facilities are underway. Reception centers for children abducted by the LRA also are reporting decreases in children.

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PEACE AND RECONCILIATION
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17. (SBU) Religious officials involved in the Juba talks were upbeat about the prospects for both peace and reconciliation, but are concerned that the international community's push for justice "Western-style" will undermine local reconciliation efforts. Just returned from Juba, Monsignor Obong of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative believes that despite his crimes, Kony can be accepted back into society if he accepts responsibility for his crimes. Obong described the traditional process of exposing the truth (crimes); acknowledgment of responsibility; judgment and compensation; and then granting of mercy by victims to establish lasting peace. Acholi society has no death penalty and local residents, government authorities, and traditional and religious officials believe that the Kony's victims have no other choice but to forgive him through traditional rituals.

18. (SBU) Poloffs heard repeatedly that peace is the highest priority for northern Ugandans. Peace is needed before reconciliation can be carried out. Justice issues, according to Obong, need to be sorted out, but should come as part of the Acholi society's own recovery process. Local leaders

fear the ICC indictments will dissuade Kony from accepting peace. In Obong's opinion, the international community can best serve Acholiland through reconstruction and development efforts, which will help victims regain their livelihood more so than ICC indictments. They are concerned that the Government of Uganda's general amnesty to the LRA also undermines the traditional reconciliation process because the perpetrators never have to admit to or accept responsibility for their crimes.

¶9. (SBU) James Otto, Executive Director, Human Rights Focus, expressed concern that national and international actors will short-circuit local efforts to secure peace, reconciliation, and justice. His opinion, similar to the religious leaders, was that international efforts to pursue peace and justice simultaneously have been unsuccessful and that it is time for northern Ugandans to secure peace first and then deal with the justice issues over the next year. He acknowledged that the reconciliation process would not be as easy as some expect. He suggested that a variation of a truth and reconciliation commission may be an example that could serve local, national, and international needs for justice. Local government officials are considering establishing a War Information Center for northern Ugandans that would allow them to tell their stories for the historic record. Another possibility is the naming of infrastructure projects such as wells, schools, roads, and clinics after victims.

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COMING CHALLENGES
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¶10. (SBU) In addition to reconciliation and justice, Gulu residents are concerned about the potential conflict over land as IDPs return to their homes, victim compensation, maintaining security, and coordination among donors and the Government on reconstruction activities after a peace deal is reached. There are concerns that some returning IDPs will find others on their land. There also is concern that all northern Ugandans affected by the war, not just ex-LRA abductees and ex-LRA combatants, receive adequate compensation for possessions and property lost during the war. There is some resentment among local populations that donors are "rewarding" ex-LRA with incentive packages to the

detriment of others affected. The Ugandan military is becoming spread thin as it tries to provide security for those returning to their lands. As "decongestion" continues, it means more places for the UPDF to patrol. The President promised 33 police officers per district in the north, but there is no funding for their upkeep. Finally, local residents welcome increased donor activity, but fear that lack of coordination may result in inefficient expenditures and misguided priorities.

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COMMENT
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¶11. (SBU) Northern Ugandans desperately want an end to the war. The relatively calm security situation is enabling some aspects of pre-war life to re-emerge, enough so to make residents consider their future. As local authorities and religious and traditional leaders grapple with "post-war" scenarios for reconstruction and reconciliation, they remain concerned that other international and national actors consider their views on consolidating a durable peace when a deal is reached.

BROWNING